

Testimony before the Committee on Higher Education and Employment Advancement

**HB 6403: An Act Requiring Legislative Approval for the Merger or Closing
of Institutions Within the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities**

Submitted by Francis M, Coan, Ph.D., Professor of History, Tunxis Community College

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Dear Senators and Representatives:

My name is Francis Coan. I am a Professor of History at Tunxis Community College and have served that institution for the past thirty years. Between 2007 and 2019, I chaired the Social Sciences and History Department. Currently, I am the elected Tunxis representative on the Board of Regents Faculty Advisory Committee.

I strongly support House Bill 6403 and urge you to pass it with the following changes:

1. The proposed bill states that if the legislature does not act within one year, a proposed merger or closure “shall be deemed approved.” I recommend changing that to “shall be deemed not approved.” (Lines 32 and 33)
2. I recommend adding the clause “that the BOR shall not seek regional accreditation for a merger that has not been approved by the General Assembly.”

If enacted into law, this bill will restore the oversight power the General Assembly possessed over the community colleges and Connecticut state universities until the creation of the Board of Regents (BOR) in 2011.

Over the past decade, the BOR has approved various initiatives aimed at reducing expenses, recruiting and retaining students, and streamlining academic programs and services at the seventeen Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) institutions. The so-called “Students First” plan to combine the community colleges into a single Connecticut State Community College (CSCC) is just the latest—albeit the most far-reaching—of these initiatives. None of the previous plans achieved its objectives, and mounting evidence suggests that “Students First” will be no more successful.

Others have documented the short but tumultuous history of the BOR, the ballooning administrative costs of the CSCU System Office, the centralization of decision-making at 61 Woodland Street and consequent loss of autonomy among the colleges and universities, the lack of meaningful faculty and staff participation in decision-making, and the absence of dialogue between system management on the one hand and the faculty and staff on the other hand. This unitary state model, not yet fully implemented, is already exhibiting signs of failure.

One significant failure has been in the consolidation of so-called “back-office” support services, such as Information Technology, Human Resources, and Payroll, at the regional and system

level. At the beginning of this semester, hundreds of panicked, frustrated, and angry students emailed and called Information Technology support, which has been centralized in Hartford, because they were not listed as enrolled in courses they had enrolled in or because they could not access remote courses on Blackboard. These problems have still not been fully resolved. With the consolidation of Human Resources, faculty and staff at most of the colleges have no idea who they are supposed to communicate with if they have a HR question. The consolidation of Payroll has resulted in numerous part-time faculty not receiving contracts, faculty not being paid in full, and some part-time faculty not being paid at all after working for six weeks. The lessons are clear: removing personnel and decision-making from the colleges and universities has immediate and significant adverse consequences for students, faculty, and staff.

Another failure has been in the implementation of the “Students First” program, which is far behind schedule. Originally slated for completion by 2020, that goal had to be abandoned when the accreditation body, the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), termed the goal “unrealistic” and the plan “half-baked.” Subsequently, the BOR moved the deadline for the launch of the Connecticut State Community College to Fall 2023. Given the amount of work that remains to be completed, however, it seems fanciful to think that this will happen. For example, some 650 academic degree and certificate programs need to be combined into about 250 common programs by Fall 2022 for inclusion in the CSCC catalog. Fall 2022 is only eighteen months from now. To date, not a single program, and only one course, has been approved. Since 2017, tens of millions of dollars have been siphoned away from the colleges and universities to fund an institution that will take years to complete—if indeed it ever is completed—and has not yet secured NECHE accreditation, an absolute necessity since federal financial aid is linked to accreditation.

The seventeen CSCU colleges and universities have enabled countless thousands of Connecticut residents, most of them of modest means, to receive excellent educations, enrich and better their lives, and thus better the state. These institutions are public trusts and need to be safeguarded as such. Prior to 2011, the General Assembly had the power to veto any proposed merger or closure among these institutions. This bill would restore that power. Given the scope of Students First and the problems inherent and manifest in the plan, and given that, if implemented, it will transform the community college system into something it is not and was not designed to be, it is imperative that the elected representatives of the citizenry have the final say in its fate.

In closing, I again urge your support for House Bill 6403 with the changes I have suggested above. Thank you for your consideration.